DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 042 224 CG 005 822

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TITLE The Relation of Self Concept and Frustration to Aggression in Emotionally Disturbed and Normal Children Placed in Special and Regular Programs.
INSTITUTION American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C.; Delaware Univ., Newark.
PUB DATE Mar 70
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 2-6, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.55
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression, Behavior, *Behavior Patterns, Behavior Problems, Conflict, Elementary School Students, *Emotionally Disturbed Children, Hostility, Pupil Personnel Services, *Self Concept, Self Esteem, *Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

The document discusses the effects of frustration on the aggressive behaviors of emotionally disturbed and normal children with high or low self concepts. Predicted were that greater amounts of verbal and behavioral aggression would be shown by: (1) emotionally disturbed subjects in special education classes than for normal subjects; (2) subjects under conditions of frustration than for subjects in non-frustration conditions; and (3) subjects with measured low self concept than for subjects with high measured self concept. Subjects were 32 emotionally disturbed and 32 normal male children, ages nine or ten. Results show that: (1) a) verbal aggression depends upon an individual's adjustment status, b) direct behavioral expression of aggression is unrelated to an individual's adjustment status; (2) a) verbal aggression shows an inverse association with the experimental treatment conditions, b) differences with respect to behavioral aggression are unrelated to treatment conditions; (3) there is no significant difference in verbal or behavioral aggression for high or low self concept children following frustration; (4) no significant interactions occur on the adjustment status, frustration and self concept level; and (5) children manifesting one type of aggressive response tend not to use the other. (MC/Author)

ED 042224

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THE RELATION OF SELF-CONCEPT AND FRUSTRATION TO AGGRESSION IN EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED AND NORMAL CHILDREN PLACED IN SPECIAL AND REGULAR PROGRAMS[1]

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This investigation dealt with the effects of frustration on the aggressive behaviors of emotionally disturbed and normal children with high or low self-concepts in special and regular class programs. The specific psychological question at issue was the extent to which self-concept operates as an antecedent condition to the expression of aggressive and acting out behaviors in frustrated children. Psychological theory had generally explained aggression in terms of reactions to environmental stimulus events independent of intra-psychic processes operating within the individual (Bandura, and Walters, 1964, Berkowitz, 1962, Brenner, 1966, Dollard et. al. 1939). A review of the evidence related to self-concept, however, revealed a plausible basis for postulating its importance as an emotional characteristic intervening between the objective stimulus event (frustration) and the subjective response (aggression); (Atkinson, 1964, Brown and Farber, 1951, Hilgard, 1954, Sawrey, 1969). Experimental evidence pertaining to the relationship between frustration, self-esteem, and aggression was unavailable. If self feeling states such

[1]Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of The American Educational Research Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1970.

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as self-concept are to have instrumental value to the social scientest or educator, however, they must be linked with specific reaction modes. This study therefore attempted to subject these variables to direct experimental scrutiny--recognizing that any demonstrated relationship would be correlational rather than functional. In addition, the study attempted to uncover any association of these variables with emotionally disturbed or normal children in special and regular class school programs.

Hypothesis

For each of the dependent variables--verbal and behavioral aggression--it was predicted that greater amounts would be shown in each case by:

1. emotionally disturbed subjects who were in special education classes than for normal Ss residing in regular classes.

2. subjects under conditions of frustration than for subjects in non frustration conditions.

3. subjects with measured low self-concept than for Ss with high measured self-concepts.

Interactions for each of these main hypothesis were also predicted.

Method

The final sample used in the study consisted of 32 emotionally disturbed and 32 normal children in special and regular classes in public school elementary programs in the State of Delaware. All children were male and 9 or 10 years of age. These subjects were drawn from a preliminary sample of 103 subjects, 48 emotionally disturbed and 55 normal children, who were tested individually using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967). This instrument was designed to yield a composite self-esteem score related to the child's perception of four areas: self, home, social, and school.

High and low self-esteem categories were derived by comparing the distributions and total range of scores for individuals in each adjustment category. Distributions were matched and extreme score values were dropped from the study. A median value was arbitrarily selected for dividing each distribution into high and low self-esteem categories.

Score values in the special class high self-esteem group were than compared with score values in the regular class high self-esteem group and equal numbers (N=16) of approximately equivalent score levels were selected from each group. A similar process was used in selecting the scores of the low self-esteem groups from each type of class. Score values for the two self-esteem levels and class types were then compared for near value similarity and found to be essentially similar.

Emotionally disturbed and normal subjects from each of the high-low self-esteem groups in both special and regular classes were then randomly assigned to a frustration (experimental) or non frustration (control) treatment condition. In all, within each of the eight combinations of the three variables under study, there were eight subjects. The treatment conditions were as follows: (1) Special class-high self concept-non frustration (2) special class-low self concept-non frustration (3) Special class-high self concept-frustration (4) Special class-low self concept-frustration (5) Regular class-high self concept-non frustration (6) Regular class-low self concept-non frustration (7) Regular class-high self concept-frustration (8) Regular class-low self concept-non frustration.

In addition, four children of the same sex and age were selected as confederates and assigned as "frustrators" and "helpers" to the experimental activities of the study. They were selected from separate elementary schools to assure their anonymity.

Experimental Procedures

The experiment was conducted in two phases and followed, with few modifications, the procedures used in Mallick's 1966 study of the catharsis of aggression.

Phase One.--The subjects (Ss) in the experimental group were frustrated by the like-sex confederates. The Ss of the control groups were not frustrated. Each S in the frustration condition was asked to complete five easy block-building assignments, one by one, each to be finished within 1 minute 10 seconds. S was promised a reward of one nickle per completed assignment The confederate was introduced to the S as his co-worker, but neither promised nor given money. After preliminary instruction each S was given five nickles with the assurance that he would earn them easily by successfully completing the assignment. None of the Ss, however, were able to complete any assignments since the previously trained confederate created hinderances in his work. As a result every S returned all the nickles given at the beginning, one by one.

At the end of the first phase every S was given a graphic rating scale to show his "like-dislike" of the confederate. It consisted of a line eight inches long divided equally into five parts labeled on a continuum from "I like him very much" at the left extreme to "I really don't like him at all" at the right extreme. The contents of the scale were read to the S along with the instructions for answering. The score was derived by measuring the distance in centimeters from the left extreme of the scale to the check mark made by the S. The higher the score the greater the dislike of the S for the confederate.

Phase Two.--This phase was designed to obtain a non-verbal measure of residual hostility for each subject. The subject was told that the confed-

erate, who was sitting in another room, was doing a blockbuilding assignment. The S could either "slow down" or "help" in speeding the confederate's work by pushing either of the two electric switches on a 6 x 10, 3½ metal box placed before him. The S could push the buttons only up to a total of 20 times. The "slowing" and "helping" switches were connected to an electric circuit activating a red or green light respectively, in the other room. The S was assured that his response would not be shown to anybody, and he was at liberty to push any switch as he pleased. He was told to begin pushing the switches when given a light signal. The experimenter then went to the next room, gave the light signal to the S by pushing a switch there, and started recording Ss responses from a response panel in his room. The aggression score of each S was the number of times he pushed the "slowing" switch out of the total of 20 pushes.

To counterbalance any effects of the location of switches on response tendencies the functions of the switches were alternated for one-half of the Ss in each condition. The time of day and the sequence of the two conditions were counterbalanced systematically for all groups.

At the end of the experimental session each S was told that his performance was excellent. To maintain the secrecy he was asked not to discuss the experiment on the plea that other children might exceed his excellent (hypothetical) score. The experimenter took special care to retain the confidence of the confederates by rewarding them daily with lunch, sweets, and special favors. At the completion of the study, all the Ss in the frustration treatment groups were told about the role of the confederate and were quite pleased at receiving candy bars distributed by the latter.

Analysis of Data

A three-way analysis of variance was carried out in which the experimental data from the two levels of each factor (frustration, adjustment status, and self-esteem) was analyzed.

The various treatment combinations (noted earlier) resulting from the 2 x 2 x 2 factorial arrangement were analyzed for significance of main effects and interaction effects.

Results

The findings did not support the intervening variable hypothesis for self-concept as it relates to frustration and aggression. Results showed that:

1. (a) The expression of verbal aggression depends in part upon an individual's adjustment status. Emotionally disturbed children showed a significantly greater amount of verbal aggression than did normal children (under similar circumstances.)

   (b) The direct (behavioral) expression of aggression is unrelated to an individual's adjustment status i.e. for either the sample of emotionally disturbed or normal children.

2. (a) The expression of verbal aggression shows a significant but inverse association with the experimental treatment conditions of frustration and non frustration. Subjects who were not frustrated tended to reveal more verbal aggression than those who were frustrated.

   (b) Differences with respect to the expression of behavioral aggression were unrelated to either treatment condition--frustration or non frustration.

3. There was no significant difference in the expression of either verbal or behavioral aggression for high or low self concept children following frustration.

4. For each of the original comparison variables--adjustment status, frustration, and self-concept level--no significant interactions were observed.
5. A significant negative, but low order, correlation was revealed between verbal and behavioral expressions of aggression. Children manifesting one type of aggressive response (i.e., verbal) tended not to use the other (i.e., behavioral).

Summary Discussion

This study sought to determine whether a functional relationship exists between an individual's self-concept, adjustment status, and his susceptibility to frustration and aggression. In general, the results offered no statistical proof or consistent support for each of the hypothesis proposed relative to the dependent variables--verbal aggression and behavioral aggression. An exception was noted for hypothesis one, however, in which greater verbal aggression was shown by disturbed as contrasted to normal children.

Limitations in the study method and design possibly effecting the results of the study are as follows:

1. Inasmuch as the frustration treatment was particularly crucial for demonstrating support for each of the proposed hypothesis, subsequent replications of these procedures should include revisions that would temporarily extend and intensify this experience as well as make its relationship to the arousal of self-esteem feelings more pertinent.

2. Sample size should be increased using random selection procedures to determine if the tendency for aggression is greater under conditions of frustration or non frustration when the subjects are more representative of normal and emotionally disturbed children from regular and special classes.
3. Additional correlates to self-esteem should be explored to reveal the influences of such characteristics as anxiety, defensiveness, and child rearing patterns as possible factors that inhibit or facilitate the expression of aggression. Although limited efforts were made toward this direction in each of these areas, further refinement of measuring devices is needed before reliable correlates can be established.
4. Are the test items in the Self-Esteem Inventory, in fact, valid samples of the psychological construct--"self-concept." The value of the SEI as a preclassification measure for assigning subjects to experimental treatment groups could possibly be strengthened. Its use in conjunction with the situ measures of behavior (Behavior Rating Form) and more projective estimates of self-esteem (Projective Self-Esteem Inventory) was attempted in this study but correlational data showed the three instruments to be essentially unrelated for the four equivalent level self-esteem groups that were compared.

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